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# ON THE MUSICAL SILK ROUTE: PIANO MUSIC OF ALEXINA LOUIE

BY

ESTHER YU-HUI CHU ©

An essay submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Music

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

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The undersigned certify that they have examined, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance a thesis comprising four recitals and an essay titled, "On the Musical Silk Route: Piano Music of Alexina Louie" submitted by Esther Yu-Hui Chu in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Music.

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*TO JESUS AND MY FAMILY*

**Abstract**

One of several outstanding stylistic elements of Alexina Louie's piano music is her extensive use of imaginative figurations. This particular kind of gesture derives from Louie's experience with the Japanese *Gagaku* ensemble and with the Chinese stringed instrument called the *ch'in*--an experience that not only influences the shape of figurations on the printed page, but also shapes the player's mental and spiritual experiences during the performance of her music. In addition, minimalism, a twentieth-century stylistic movement inspired by the Eastern concepts of restraint and distillation, influences Louie's approach to melody and rhythm. As well as Eastern influences, Louie's piano music incorporates a number of pianistic elements used in the music of Claude Debussy (1862-1918). Inspired by the use of color in impressionist paintings, Debussy shaped his highly individual idea of piano sound by re-defining dynamics as an expressive device; he also explored the uses of the three pedals individually as well as together, and applied unique verbal descriptions for performance indications. Louie utilizes these three compositional approaches and combines them with elements from her Eastern heritage to establish her own individual soundscape. For her works, Louie also chooses elegant titles that fulfill the aesthetic requirement presented in Chinese landscape paintings and poetry. In addition to being descriptive and metaphorical, her choices of titles may also be poetic in themselves--a characteristic which also appears in some of Debussy's titles for his piano compositions.

Having been trained in the traditional Western musical practice, Louie dexterously applies scales, tonal implications, chords, and fast-slow-fast alternation of tempi in her piano compositions. However, as a contemporary composer, she is also emancipated from the traditional compositional rules. The most important Eastern aspect that is combined with Western compositional approach in Louie's music is the duality of *yin* and *yang*. To the Chinese, the contrast of *yin* and *yang* must exist together and in balance to achieve a perfection. Louie applies this concept in her use of the piano, in her organization of both horizontal and vertical compositional materials, and in her use of alternating tempi.

**Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

The Canadian composer Alexina Louie once said that she was deeply affected by the deaths of two Canadian artists--pianist Glenn Gould and composer Claude Vivier.[1] Their deaths made her think very carefully about the contribution of the artist to the world and what remains even after the artist has died. Motivated by this idea, she decided to write the kind of music she felt she had to write even if it proved difficult for the audience to understand. She persisted with this notion and eventually discovered and developed her own musical language. Her music, influenced by both her Chinese heritage and her Western classical music training, has been described as a uniquely personal, expressive style rooted in a blend of East and West.[2]

Many people who hear Louie's music for the first time are attracted to its unique sound and mysterious quality, aspects which distinguish her music from that of other composers. Her approach to creating distinctive timbre embodies three very important aspects--the use of figuration, the influence of Claude Debussy (1862-1918), and the use of titles. Within these three aspects, her Eastern and Western traditions subtly fuse with each other. The mysterious character of Louie's music can be attributed to her understanding and use of the Chinese *yin/yang* principle. She balances *yin* and *yang* in her use of the piano and in her use of structural materials. By organizing the two features--her personal treatment of

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[1]Alexina Louie, program note to her piano piece, *I leap through the sky with stars* (Toronto, Gordon V. Thompson, 1994).

[2]Note in Louie's pedagogical collection of piano pieces, *Star Light, Star Bright* (Oakville: The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, 1995).

sound and the *yin/yang* principle--into a new fusion, Louie is able to establish her own musical style and define her bi-cultural musical identity.

A brief biographical summary is helpful in explaining the combination of Eastern and Western elements that figure so prominently in the piano music of Alexina Louie.

## Biographical Sketch

Alexina Louie was born in Vancouver, British Columbia on 30 July, 1949.[3] She began to play the piano at the age of seven. A serious wrist injury forced her to give up her dream of becoming a concert pianist, but she did not let this disaster end her hopes of becoming a musician. After obtaining her undergraduate degree in music history at the University of British Columbia, Louie decided to continue her studies in a Master of Music degree program in composition, and in 1970 she was accepted by the University of California at San Diego. At UCSD, Louie's principal teacher, avant-garde composer Pauline Oliveros (b. 1932), introduced her to the concept of listening to "music" or "sound" by doing unconventional things such as woofing, grunting, and crawling around on the floor. From 1971 to 1974, she joined seven other women in The ♀ Ensemble which practiced meditation through exercises in sound and movement. In addition, she partook in timbral experiments directed by Robert Erickson (b. 1917) which enhanced her sensitivity to the layering

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[3]For more detailed biographical information, see "Alexina Louie" in Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel, eds., *The New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers* (New York: Macmillan, 1994; reprint, 1995), 289-91. See also Elaine Keillor's "Alexina Louie" in Helmut Kallmann and Gilles Potvin, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1992), 774-5.

and blending of sounds. These experiences shaped Louie's ability to arrange her music in terms of space and timbre.

In the late seventies, while she was still living in California, Louie attended a concert of *Gagaku* music. *Gagaku* is the ancient court music of Japan, which in turn has its origins in the great Chinese musical traditions of the T'ang Dynasty (618-906 AD). Although it was Louie's first formal contact with Asian music, the mysterious sound of the *Gagaku* ensemble and the meditative quality produced by the musical structure instantly evoked her Chinese heritage and touched her soul. Later she recalled the experience and its effect on her: "It opened my ears, introduced me to oriental music, and in doing so, helped me find my own voice."[4]

In 1980, after spending ten years in California, Louie returned to Canada, where she soon gained public recognition as a composer. Especially successful was *O Magnum Mysterium*, commissioned by the Festival of Contemporary Music at McGill University in 1983. This work, written for forty-four strings, was inspired by the intense emotions she felt at Glenn Gould's funeral earlier that year. In 1986 Louie was named Composer of the Year by the Canadian Music Council. Two years later, the Canadian music recording industry honored her with a Juno Award in the Best Classical Composition category for her *Songs of Paradise*. In 1990, Louie received the first SOCAN award for concert music, and the next year, Rhombus Media and the National Film Board produced a film entitled *The Eternal Earth* (1986), documenting Louie's

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[4]William Littler, "Music a tribute to Glenn Gould," *Toronto Star*, 7 October 1984.

life and music.[5] Her works have been frequently performed by the best orchestras in Canada, both in concerts at home and abroad.

Today, Louie lives in Toronto and works as a free-lance composer in addition to her recent appointment as the composer-in-residence of the Canadian Opera Company. She is wholly committed to the creation and promotion of new music, with compositions in almost all categories from orchestral music, chamber ensemble, choral music, to solo piano pieces. Although this essay discusses only a few of her solo piano works in detail, Table 1 catalogues all of her solo piano works completed to this date.

**Table 1. Alexina Louie's Compositions for Solo Piano**

| Date | Title | Publication | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1978 | *Dragon Bells* | Unpublished | For prepared piano and pre-recorded prepared piano |
| 1982; rev. 1985 | *Music for Piano* | Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1993 | (a) The Enchanted Bells<br>(b) Changes<br>(c) Distant Memories<br>(d) Once Upon A Time<br><br>Dedicated to Jean Lyons<br><br>Commissioned by the Alliance for Canadian New Music Projects through the Ontario Arts Council |
| 1987 | *Star-filled Night* | Unpublished | Commissioned by Christina Petrowska through the Canada Council |

[5]SOCAN is the Society of Composers, Authors, and Music Publishers of Canada.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1988 | *Scenes From A Jade Terrace* | Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1996 | I. Warrior<br>II. Memories In An Ancient Garden<br>III. Southern Sky<br><br>Commissioned by Jon Kimura Parker through the CBC and the Ontario Arts Council |
| 1991 | *I leap through the sky with stars* | Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1994 | Commissioned by the Canadian Music Competition in 1991 through the Assistance of the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council |
| 1994 | *Star Light, Star Bright* (Intermediate piano solo) | The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, 1995 | (a) Distant Star (b) Blue Sky I<br>(c) Star-Gazing<br>(d) Rings of Saturn<br>(e) Moonlight Toccata<br>(f) O Moon (g) Shooting Stars<br>(h) Blue Sky II (i) Into Forever<br><br>Dedicated to Louie's daughters Jasmine and Jade |
| 1995 | *Starstruck* | Unpublished | I. Starstruck<br>II. Interlude: Midnight Sky<br>III. Berceuse des étoiles<br>IV. Epilogue<br><br>Commissioned by the Eckhardt-Gramatté Competition through the CBC and the Canada Council |
| 1996 | *Touch* | Unpublished | Commissioned by The Esther Honens Calgary International Piano Competition And Festival |

# Chapter One

## Sound

Melody, harmony, and rhythm have been considered as the cornerstones of Western classical music. Melody and harmony, the horizontal and vertical building materials, establish an essential framework for music, while rhythm not only manages the time spacings horizontally as well as vertically, but also animates and propels the music forward. A fourth essential element, noted by Aaron Copland in *What to Listen for in Music*, is timbre.[6] Every sound can be distinguished from every other one because of its unique timbre, no matter if it is a "pleasant sound" or an "unpleasant sound." For example, a child is unlikely to confuse her father's voice with that of her mother, because she recognizes the distinctly different timbres of her father's and her mother's voices. Because of this natural human ability to perceive different timbres, we are able to make decisions about which kinds of sound are more pleasant than the others. However, the environment or society in which one lives may play an important role in changing or extending this perception of what is a "pleasant" or an "unpleasant" sound. For instance, many nineteenth-century compositions were associated with literature, and composers strove to discover new instrumental sounds that could convey the abundant and multi-dimensional expressive layers of the extramusical implications. As well, technical improvements in the instruments

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[6]Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1939), 78-100.

themselves enhanced the opportunities for a wider exploration of the timbral range.

In his discussion of timbre, Copland suggests that everyone has a natural ability to appreciate a wide spectrum of tone colors, and that this innate capability should be encouraged and developed.[7] Parallel to this idea, composers in the twentieth century continue to expand and stretch the traditional concepts of musical sound. Unlike the music of previous centuries, twentieth-century music is not dominated by one specific movement, but has encompassed and explored a large variety of musical styles. Modern music is characterized by the diversity among stylistic approaches, and even by remarkable individuality within those styles themselves. On the other hand, regardless of the different approaches to music that modern compositions reveal, a common characteristic many of them share is the wish to evoke the power and expression of sound for its own sake.

Moving from the novel sonic treatment of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), around 1950 the fascination with sound itself was further intensified by the experiments of avant-garde composers like Olivier Messiaen (1908-1922), John Cage (b. 1912), Pierre Boulez (b. 1925), and Karlheinz Stockhausen (b. 1928) and by those who worked with electronic sounds--Edgard Varèse (1883-1965), Pierre Schaeffer (b. 1910), and again Karlheinz Stockhausen. Their explorations of sound inspired other later twentieth-century composers to look for many other new sources for creating "new music."

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[7]Ibid., 79.

As a contemporary composer, Alexina Louie also appears to derive inspiration from the challenge of exploring and manipulating the possibilities of timbre. But beyond her interest in creating unusual sounds, Louie is influenced by several specific musical traditions. These traditions reveal the cultural duality of her Chinese/Western heritages, and are all present in her works for the piano: the use of figuration, drawing inspiration from oriental instruments as well as the influence of minimalism; the approach to timbre in the piano music of Claude Debussy; and, the use of elaborate descriptive, metaphorical, and poetic titles.

## 1. Figuration

a. Inspiration from Oriental Instruments

In Louie's works, it is easy for the listener to recognize the "exotic spirit" of the music. As noted earlier, this characteristic is the result of her ten-year residency in California. Although she lived in Vancouver's Chinatown for the first five years of her life, Louie had never seriously realized how important her Chinese heritage was to her until she experienced the intensive power of the *Gagaku* music she heard in California. Although different categories of Japanese *Gagaku* have their own instrumentation, in general, the present version of the ensemble consists of string, wind, and percussion instruments (Figure 1). Among these instruments, Louie was especially astonished by the sounds produced by two wind instruments, the *hichiriki* and the *sho*. The *hichiriki*, a short double-reed instrument with nine finger-holes, is usually used to play melodies in the ensemble (Figure 2). Because of its size and

acoustic design, the *hichiriki* produces a very poignant and piercing sound.

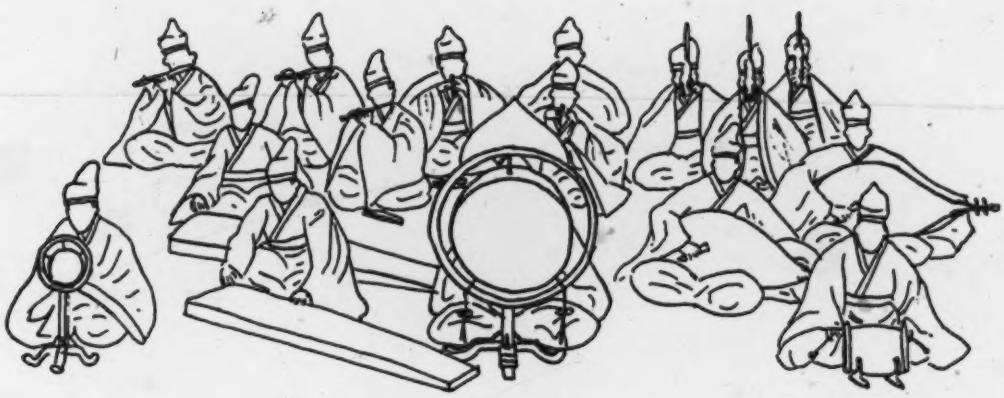


Figure 1. Line Drawing of the *Gagaku* Ensemble

Figure 2. *Hichiriki*

The *sho*, a small mouth organ, the counterpart of the Chinese *sheng*, is constructed of seventeen bamboo pipes, of which fifteen are equipped with small metal reeds (Figures 3a, b, & c). Its construction enables this instrument to produce the incredible continuous harmonic clusters that support the melodies played by the *hichiriki* and other wind instruments. The similarly intense sound quality produced by both the *hichiriki* and the *sho* creates the strong emotional power of *Gagaku* music, a power which becomes an important part of Alexina Louie's concept of timbre.

Figure 3a. Chinese *Sheng*

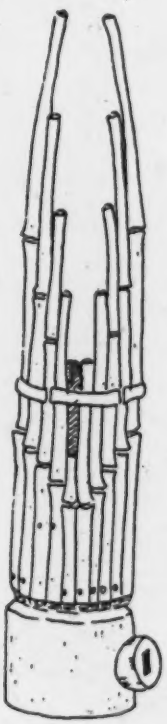


Figure 3b. Japanese *Sho*

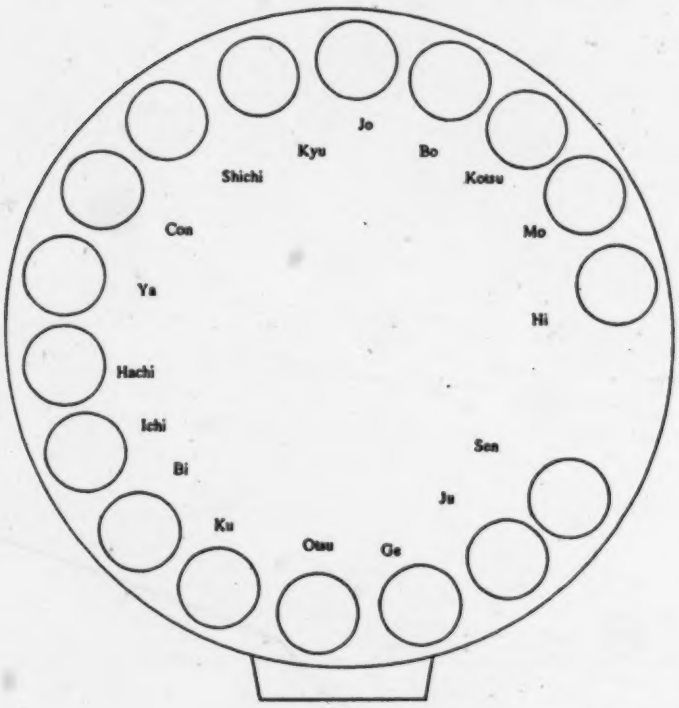


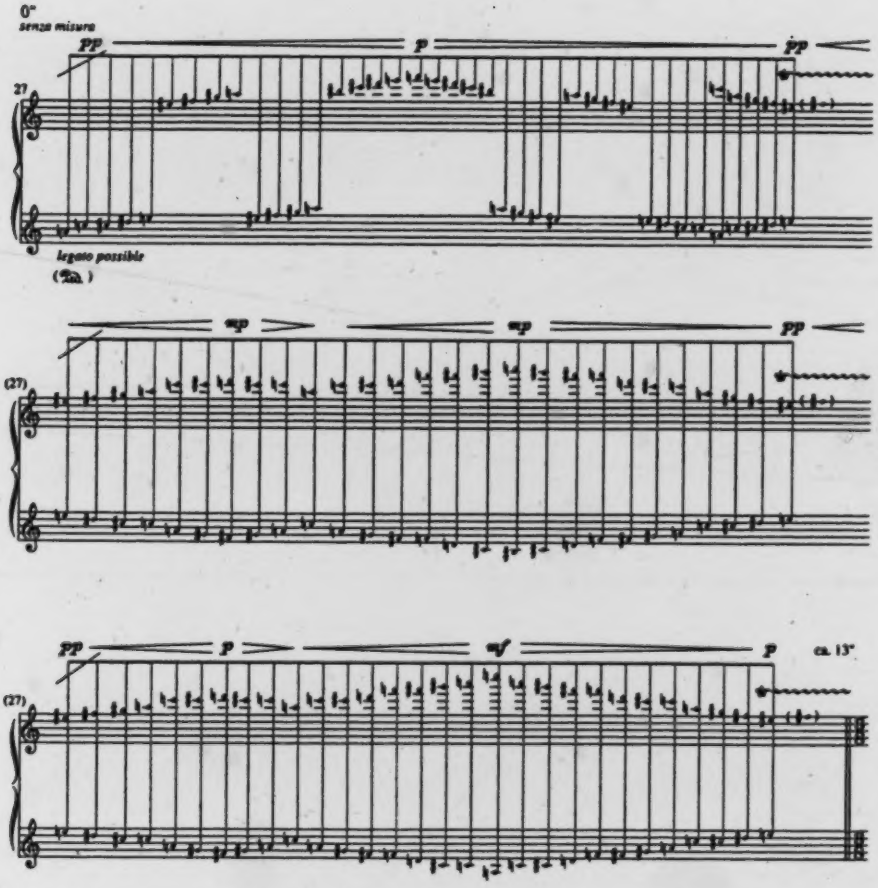

Figure 3c. The Arrangement of the Pipes of the *Sho*

Louie's new-found exploration of her culture was enhanced by a friend she met at UCSD whose intense study and love of Eastern musics encouraged Louie to reconsider her own cultural identity. Inspired by this friend, Louie started to read Chinese philosophy and poetry and to listen to a variety of Eastern musics. She even went so far as to spend a year commuting weekly between San Diego and Los Angeles to learn how to play the *ch'in*, the most aristocratic and one of the most complicated Chinese instruments to learn (Figure 4). Louie has said she was amazed by the depth evoked by the subtle, refined, and quiet sound of the *ch'in.*

Figure 4. The *Ch'in*

In her piano works, this distilled and tranquil sound quality and the derivative figurative patterns of the *ch'in* can be found to operate in three ways. First, her preference for the upper register of the piano combines with the use of *una corda* in very soft dynamic markings. An examination of Louie's piano compositions reveals that almost two-thirds of them are written in the higher register of the piano. In Louie's own words, "I was drawn by the upper part of the piano, because it rings in a specific way that no other instrument can produce."[8] Example 1a illustrates Louie's writing of running-arpeggio figuration in the upper part of the instrument. This kind of figuration often appears with *una corda* in Louie's piano compositions.

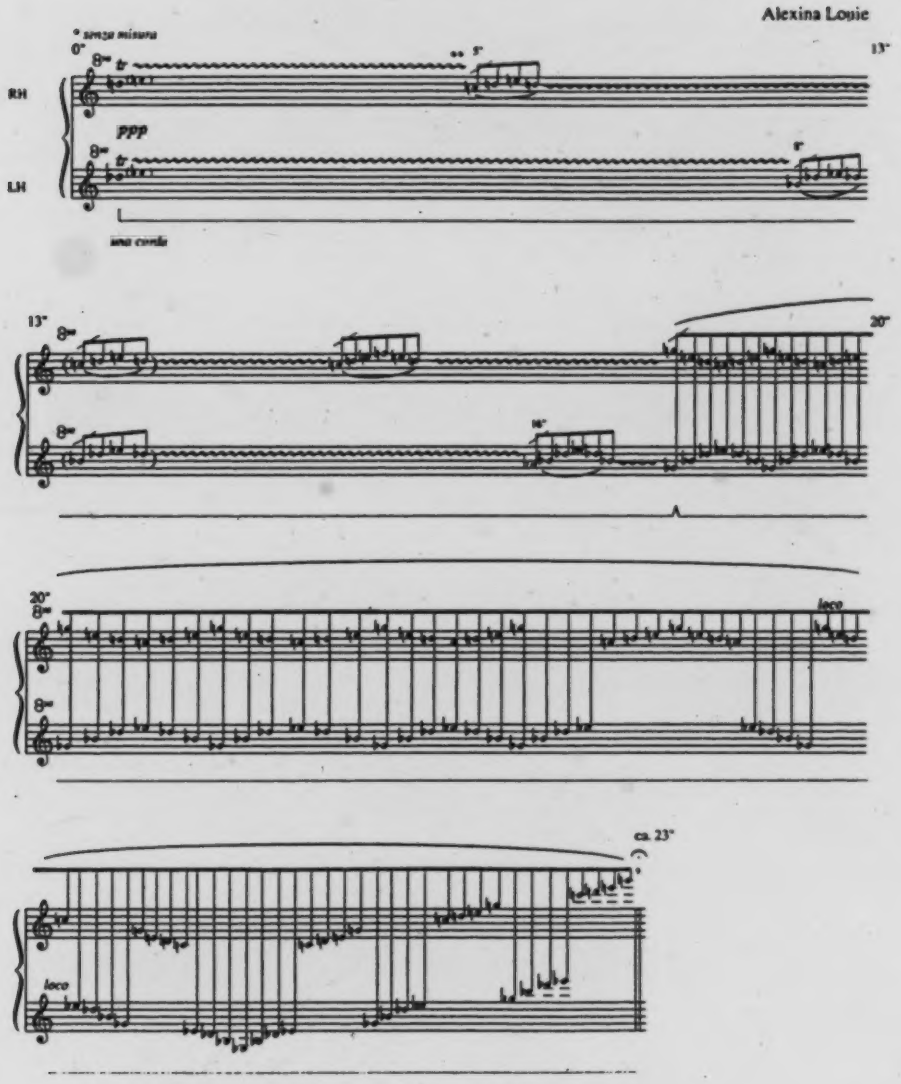
[8]Interview with the author, 16 December 1996, Toronto (audio and video recordings).




Example 1a. Louie, *Memories In An Ancient Garden,* m. 27.

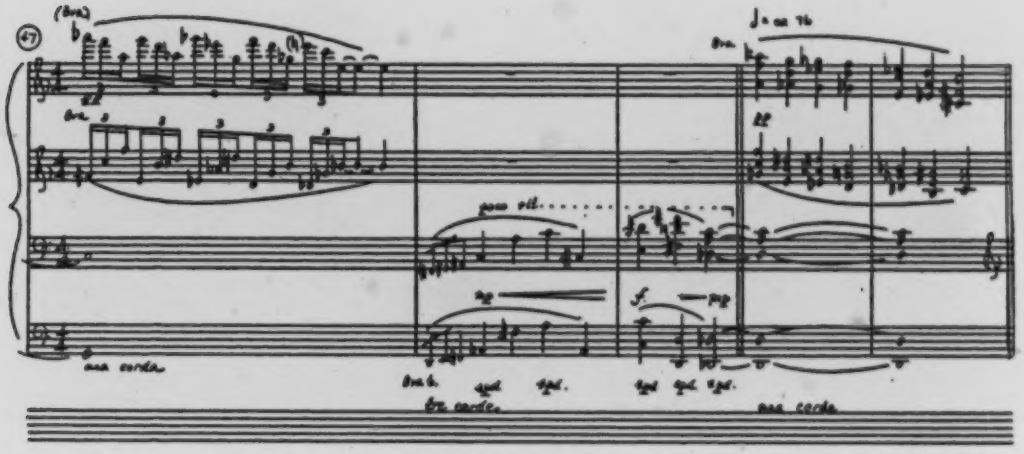
Second, because the *ch'in* consists of seven parallel strings (standardized in the Han Dynasty, 206 BC-220 AD), it enables the performer to create a surging effect by moving her hands back and forth between the strings. (This arpeggiated playing style is even more characteristic on the Chinese stringed instrument, the *guzheng*.)

## I leap through the sky with stars




Example 1b. Louie, *I leap through the sky with stars,* m. 1.

Responding to this effect, as shown in Example 1b, Louie is fond of expansively using trills and running arpeggios across the entire range of

the piano. Finally, measures 50 to 51 of Louie's *Starstruck* in Example 2 show another influence derived from the parallel strings of the *ch'in*--a series of consecutive quartal chords played *pianissimo* in the highest register of the piano. In this example, played at the tempo of a quarter note equals seventy-six, the steadily moving chords produce a distant bell-like effect. All three examples open the sound-space dimensionally, conveying an atmosphere of restraint and tranquillity in accordance with the aesthetic concepts of oriental music.

Example 2. Louie, *Starstruck*, mm. 47-51.

In addition to the importance of the distilled quality and the figural character of *ch'in* music, the philosophical attitude associated with performing on this instrument is also influential in Louie's piano music. According to the concept derived from the teachings of Confucius (551?-479? BC), the *ch'in* is played not for entertainment, but for moral

elevation--a way to regulate Heaven and the human being. Therefore, playing this instrument requires deep concentration and meditation, the spiritual goal being to achieve an intimate level of discourse between God and Man. And through the process of meditation, the player decides on the most appropriate touches on the instrument at different moments and for different effects. Thus, the involvement of the meditative process in playing the *ch'in* results in an unexpected, irregular, and improvisatory style in its compositions. On the other hand, retaining the original character of its Chinese ancestor *ya-yüeh* (elegant music), the performance of *Gagaku* music requires the players to maintain a calm, dignified, and graceful style. Therefore, the manner of performing *Gagaku* music as well as the spiritual expectation in *ch'in* music have established a kind of *gesture* which assumes a central role in Chinese music. And in Louie's music, this gesture has been transformed into certain figurations, including the running arpeggios, trills, and parallel chords.

"Gesture" is defined in two ways in *The Oxford Reference Dictionary:* "1, a movement of a limb or the body conveying meaning; the use of such movements; 2, an action to evoke a response or convey an intention."[9] Two key elements included in both definitions are a movement or an action, as well as conveying meaning, intention or evoking response. In other words, "gesture" can be seen as a communicative tool, for it carries motion and means to be evocable. And

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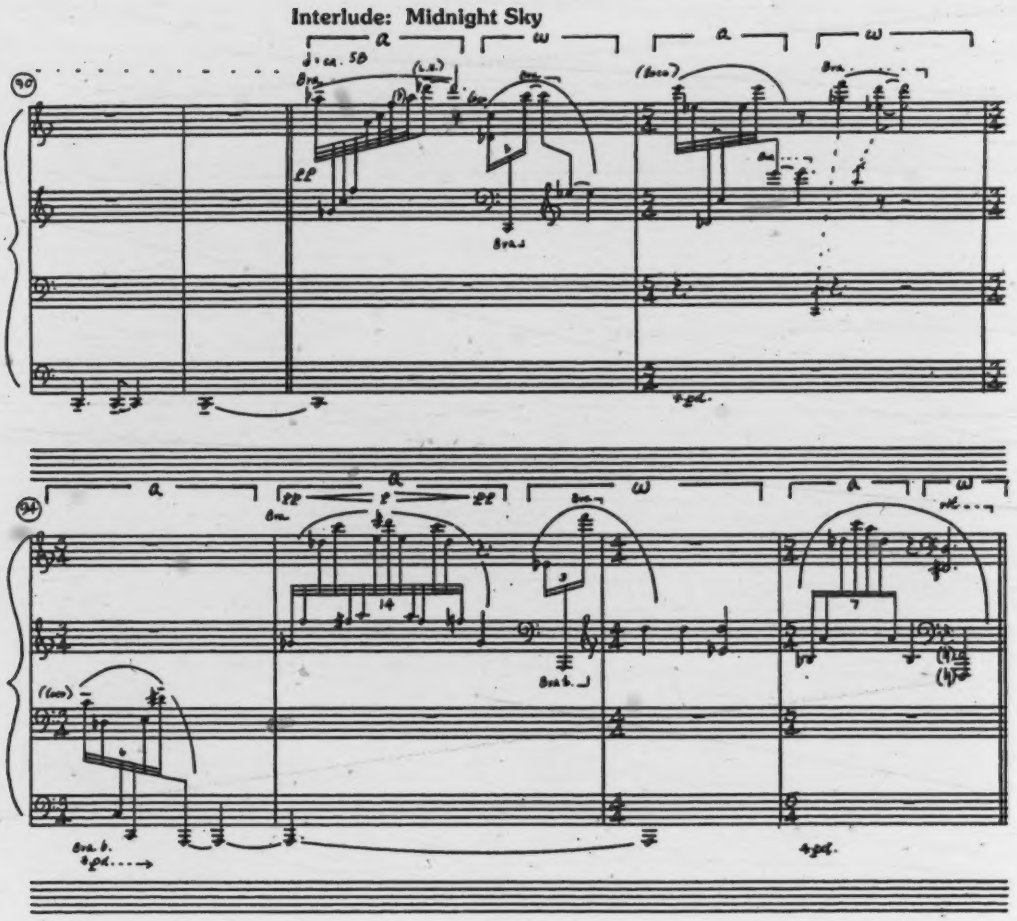
[9]See "Gesture" in J. M. Hawkins., ed. *The Oxford Reference Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 342.

"gesture" can be a highly expressive element, in music as well as in language.

*Language* comprises not only words and their use, but also a style of expression. It does not refer only to verbal utterances, but may also involve physical movement (so-called body language), in which gesture is included. Like language, music is an elaborate symbol system, and it shares with language its communicative capacity. In her music, Louie uses certain figurations to communicate different kinds of expression. These figurations--arpeggios, trills, and parallel chords--are not only the constructive and sonic productions of Chinese instruments but also the physical transformation and aesthetic presentation derived from Chinese music.

One of the best examples of the use of figuration as a transformation of gesture is shown in Example 3, the beginning of the second movement of *Starstruck--Interlude: Midnight Sky* (1995). In this passage, Louie coordinates two groups of figuration--*a*, the arpeggio-like figuration, and *w*, the less active, wide-leap one. The combinations of both figurations reach the outer-most ranges of the keyboard, with the melodic materials being distributed in a fragmented and widely-spaced manner. Through this arrangement, on one hand, Louie successfully expresses a visual picture of the night sky; on the other hand, she expresses the meditative, uncertain, and longing qualities which match the basic nature of a starry night, as well as the typical *gesture* presented in the *ch'in* compositions of classical Chinese music. In this example, Alexina Louie successfully combines the visual, sonic, and physical aspects in order to increase the substantial richness of the music.




Example 3. Louie, *Starstruck, Interlude: Midnight Sky,* mm. 92-97.

b. The Influence of Minimalism

One other influence on Louie's use of figuration comes from minimalism. Following the focus on motivic concentration and conciseness presented in the works of Anton Webern, in the late 1940s,

John Cage proposed a new idea to Western music--confining compositional elements to a minimum. Robert Morgan describes this trend in his *Twentieth-Century Music*: "Like much Oriental art, this simpler music relies upon understatement rather than exaggeration, on veiled suggestion rather than overt expressivity, and it encourages a response of passive contemplation rather than active involvement."[10] In many Chinese ink paintings, lines are reduced to a minimum; and from a Western point of view, such painting seems only to provide a contour. However, we find that this minimalisation results in presenting a kind of focus. Musically, minimalism emphasizes the subdued essence of Eastern music in contrast to the realistic complexity of traditional Western music. During the 1960s, derived from Cage's "minimum" approach, minimalism became a musical style that was further explored by a group of composers in America, such as La Monte Young (b. 1935), Terry Riley (b. 1935), Steve Reich (b. 1936), and Philip Glass (b. 1937). Stylistically, minimalism features constant thematic and rhythmic repetition, almost immobile tonal structures, and textural uniformity and transparency. All these compositional features can be found in some of Alexina Louie's music, as demonstrated in Example 4, the third movement of *Starstruck, Berceuse des étoiles*. In terms of rhythm, the basic element is the continuously running sixteenth-note patterns throughout the entire movement. Melodically speaking, it consists of only three notes--G, E, and C-sharp--in the first half, with two notes--C and A--being added in the second half. Therefore, regardless of the meter change in almost

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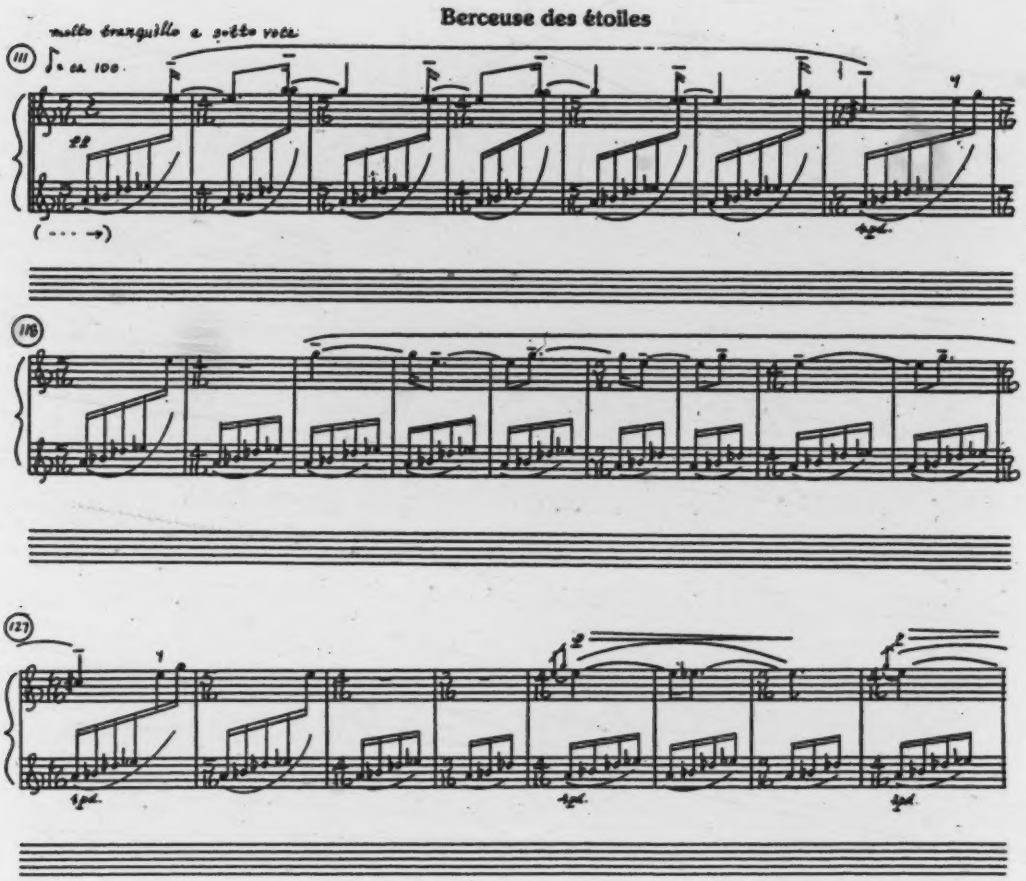
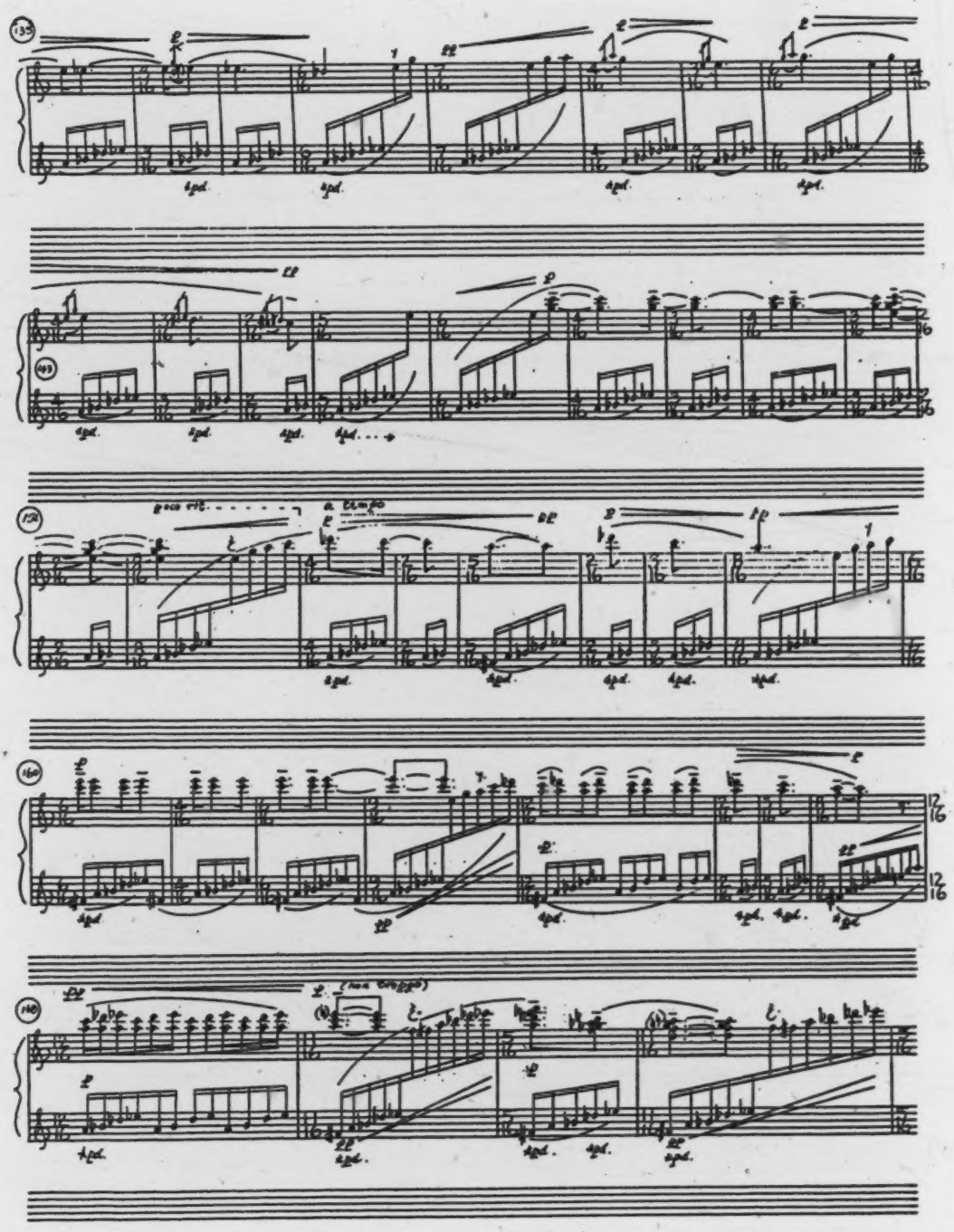
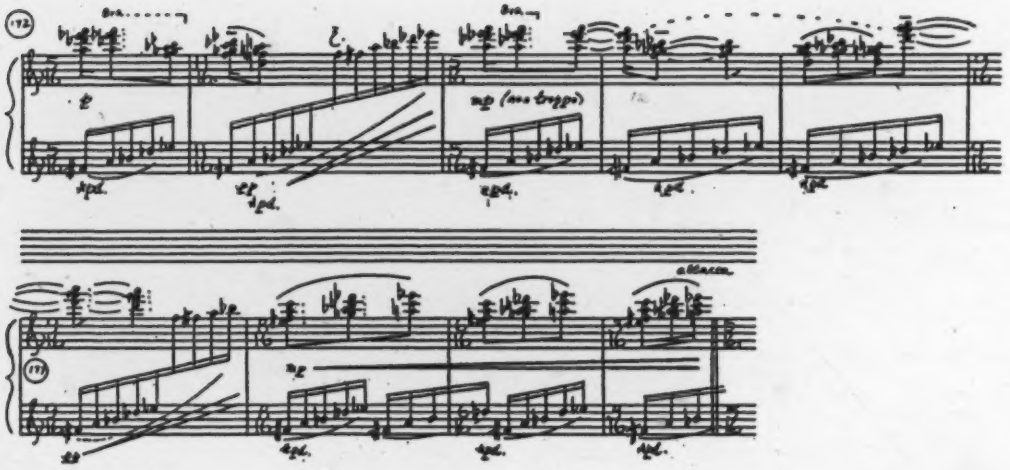
[10]Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 423.

every measure, emotional continuity and stylistic unity are maintained by the simple rhythmic and melodic devices. This simplicity in the melodic and rhythmic designs results in a special kind of emotional effect which reflects the Eastern concepts of control and stasis.





Example 4. Louie, *Starstruck, Berceuse des étoiles.*

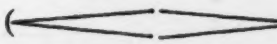
## 2. The Influence of Debussy: Dynamics, Pedalling, and Verbal Performance Indications

In addition to influences from Oriental music and minimalism, Louie's music also reveals her response to the style of Claude Debussy.

The term "impressionism" was first used to describe the style of the paintings of Claude Monet (1840-1926). The artistic movement actually takes its name from one of Monet's paintings, *Impression: Sunrise* (1872), now in the Musée Marmottan in Paris. This style flourished from about 1870 to 1900, and mostly in France. One characteristic of impressionist painting is a concentration on the way a subject is painted rather than on the subject matter itself. The term has also been used to identify a musical style which appeared about two decades later than that of the

paintings, and Claude Debussy has been regarded as its most representative composer.

In his works, Debussy discarded some conventional composition rules established by his predecessors in order to imbue his music with the phenomenal "colors" one sees in the impressionist paintings. Generally speaking, Debussy destroys the regularities of melodic phrasing and rhythm in favor of fragmentation, detached motivic units, and quick flashes of short melodic cells. Also, he untied the traditional harmonic rules by using parallelism, modes, and scales, such as the whole-tone and pentatonic, which differed from the major and minor scales that had been in common use. Debussy also elevated the importance of dynamics, pedalling, and even verbal description for layering a versatile soundscape from various different dimensions. These last three compositional features from Debussy's exceptionally original keyboard style have a great impact in Louie's piano works. Examples from Debussy's *Préludes* will serve to make this point.[11]

Although the overall dynamic level in Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige* (Footsteps in the Snow) remains soft, from *p* to *ppp*, the "hair pins" (  , , or ) are used for creating an expressive effect, as shown in Example 5. In the left hand of the first two measures, in addition to the accompanied verbal description for the ostinato rhythm *x*, Debussy marked two different kinds of hair pins, *a* and *b*, for this rhythmic figuration.[12] Hair-pin *a* only appears in the opening

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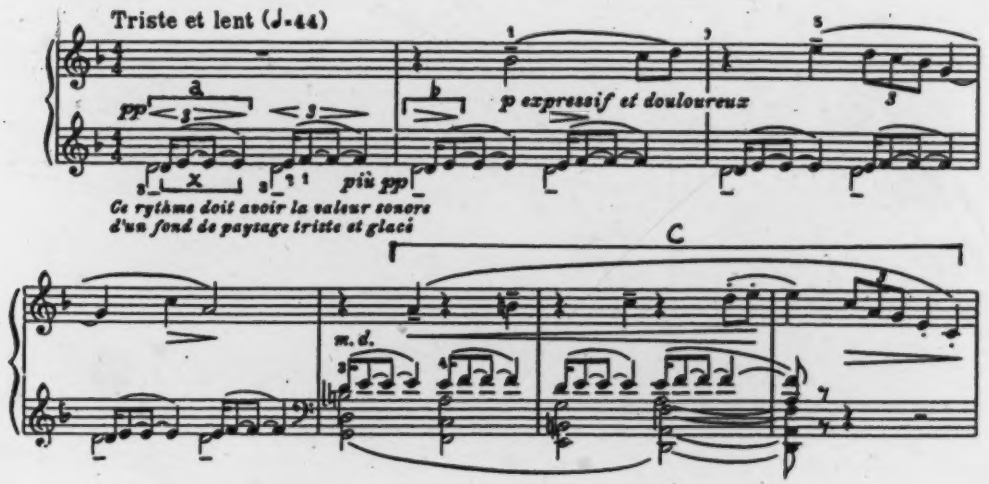
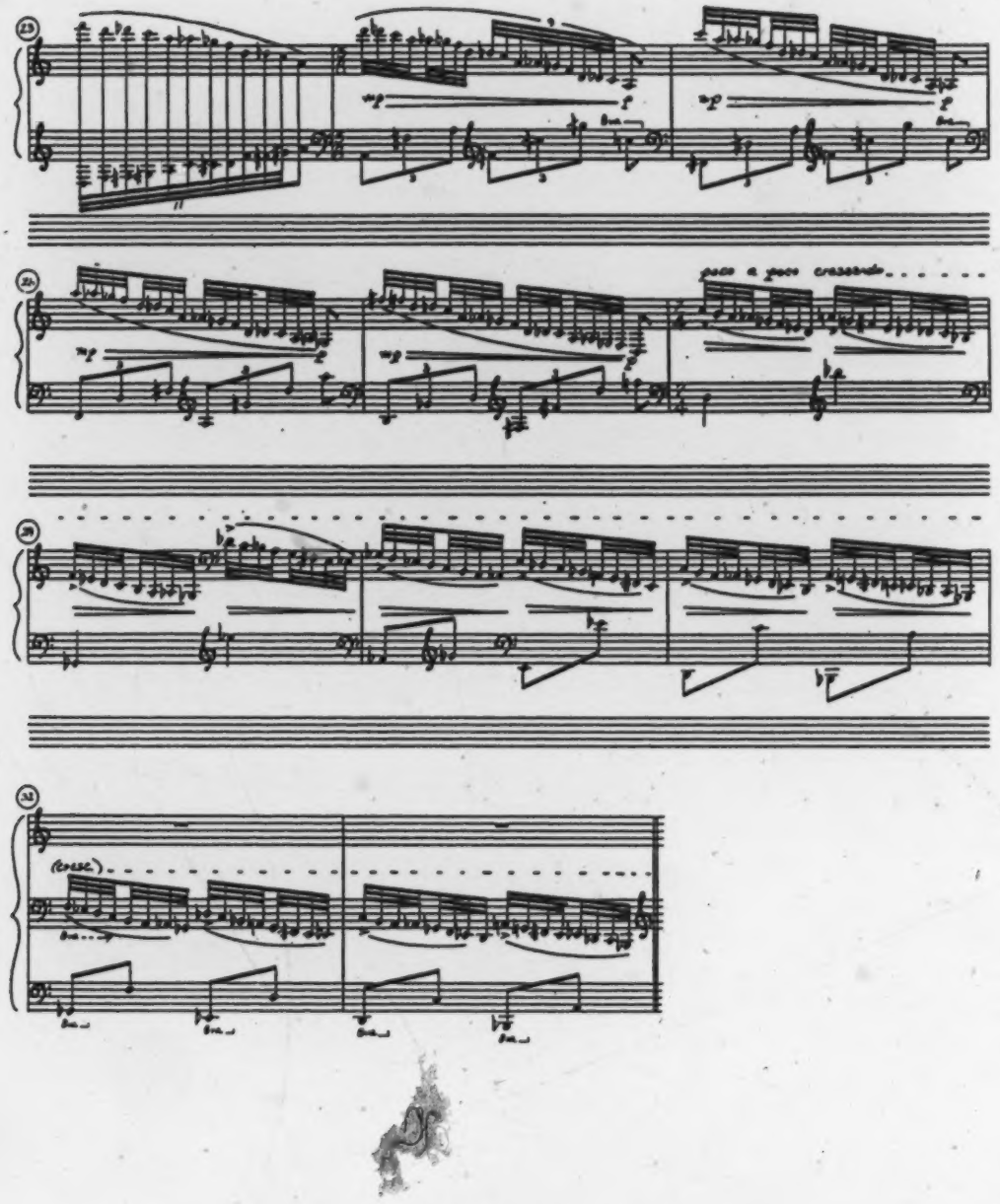
[11]Debussy's two books of *Préludes* were written in 1910 and 1913.

[12]Debussy's verbal description for figuration *x* is *Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d'un fond de paysage triste et glacé* (This rhythm must have the sonorous weight of a sad and frozen landscape).

measure, providing a progressive feeling, while hair-pin *b* reinforces the character of the lonely landscape. And from measures 5 to 7, hair-pin *c* is used for shaping the melodic phrase.

Example 5: Debussy. *Des pas sur la neige*, mm. 1-7.

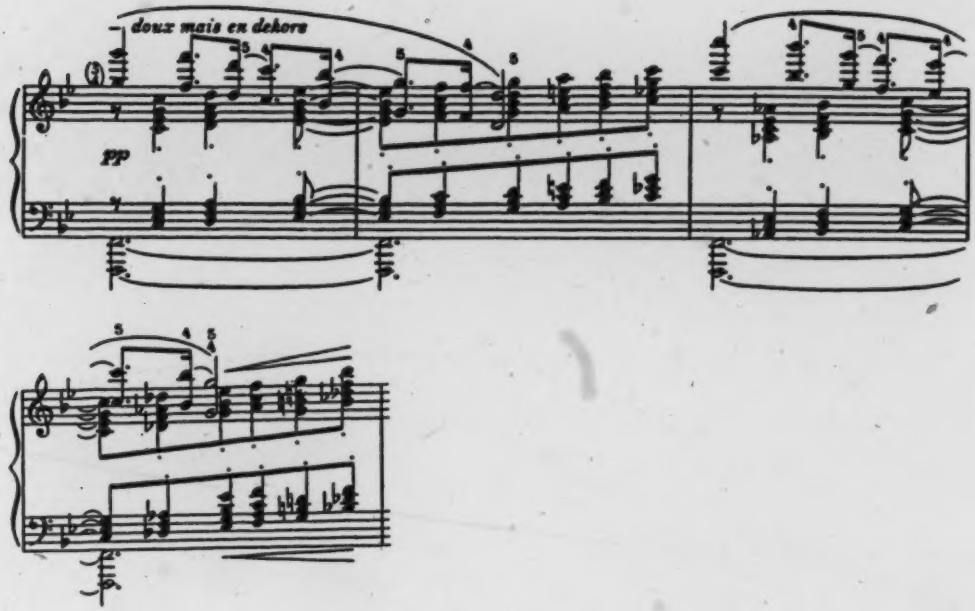
Like Debussy, Louie considers all dynamic markings to be an intrinsic part of the musical expression. In her works, she very carefully positions the dynamics--particularly the hair pins--in order to create striking, expressive effects. Example 6 illustrates her use of a sequence of consecutive dynamic markings for a repeated figuration. A definite dynamic plan is thus established, and the performer must then meet the challenge of realizing this specifically planned soundscape. The effect is confirmed from measures 28 to 33, in which a succession of consistent *diminuendi* for four measures occurs across a six-measure expanse of *poco a poco crescendo*. Thus, the eight *diminuendi* represent one expressive symbol rather than merely a series of dynamic indications.



Example 6. Louie, *Star-filled Night*, mm. 23-33.

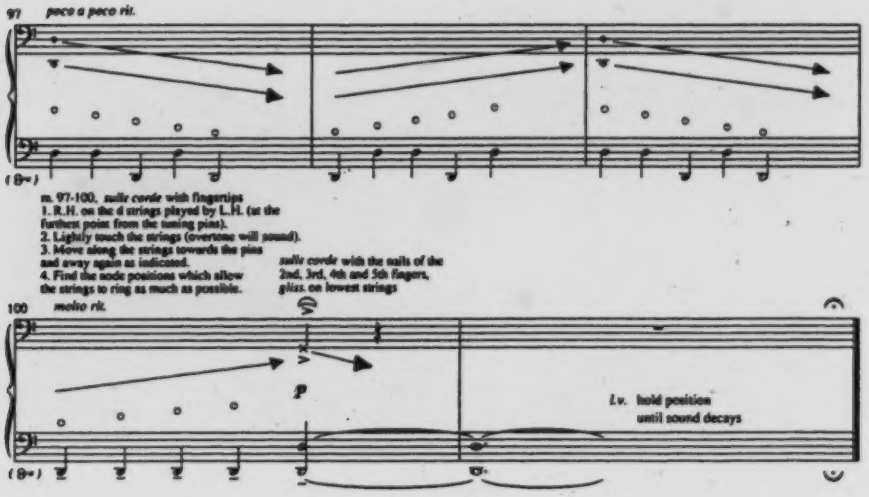
In addition to giving the dynamics an expanded and highly detailed character, in his piano compositions Debussy experimented with the use of the pedals, in order to create impressionistic timbres comparable to those he had achieved in his orchestral works by using mutes, doublings, special kinds of bowing, and harmonics. Debussy's piano works challenge the performer's sensitivity and skill in the uses of the three pedals individually as well as simultaneously. In general, *una corda* produces the sound equal to that of mutes in the orchestral works. Therefore, the soft pedal is used not for the purpose of reducing the volume of sound, but for creating an alternative timbre. Alexina Louie seems to follow this principle in her piano works, where the *una corda* sections convey a compelling mysterious quality which, from the Chinese philosophical point of view, may be regarded as the presentation of the *yin* mode.[13] The sostenuto pedal carries the same importance in Debussy's aural expression. Texturally speaking, the sostenuto pedal can be utilized to provide additional lines to the pre-existent audible lines. As shown in Example 7, measures 11 to 14 of *Danseuses de Delphes* from the first book of *Préludes*, three layers are visually presented in terms of articulations and registers. While the hands play the two upper parts, the bass octave *F* is sustained by using the middle pedal.

Although in her works Louie has not developed the acoustic effect created by using the sostenuto pedal, in her use of the damper pedal, her approach is again similar to that of Debussy: it facilitates blending and blurring of sounds melodically as well as harmonically. A blended sound effect is thus synthesized by a variety of compositional materials from

[13]The *yin* and *yang* issue will be discussed more completely in Chapter Two.

Example 7. Debussy, *Danseuses de Delphes,* mm. 11-14.

different dimensions. Starting from this approach, Louie expands the timbral effect further by combining the use of the damper pedal with the twentieth-century device of playing inside the piano. In her *Memories In An Ancient Garden* (1988), with the damper pedal down, she requires the performer to strum the strings inside the piano either by using the flesh of the finger, or the nail of the thumb, third, fourth, and fifth fingers; she also requires the player to strike the lowest strings with the open palm of the right hand. And, as shown in Example 8, she asks the player to touch strings inside the piano at certain node positions to produce specific overtones. Working from the model of Debussy, Louie utilizes the pedals as an effective tool for creating tone color, and develops an expanded

range of timbral effects through the use of these techniques (the damper pedal is depressed four bars before Example 8 begins and is maintained to the end of this example).


97
poco a poco rit.
m. 97-100, sulle corde with fingertips
1. R.H. on the d strings played by L.H. (at the furthest point from the tuning pins).
2. Lightly touch the strings (overtone will sound).
3. Move along the strings towards the pins and away again as indicated.
4. Find the node positions which allow the strings to ring as much as possible.
sulle corde with the nails of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th fingers, gliss. on lowest strings
100
molto rit.
l.v. hold position until sound decays

Example 8. Louie, *Memories In An Ancient Garden,* mm. 97-101.

The other element Louie derives from Debussy's works is the use of verbal description for certain performance effects. At the end of *Le vent dans la plaine (Wind in the Plain),* Debussy writes *laissez vibrer* (let vibrate) to create a resonant but fading effect. A similar instruction--*quittez, en laissant vibrer* (stop, and let vibrate)--appears in the opening measures of *Les collines d'Anacapri* (The Hills of Anacapri) from the same book of *Préludes.* Likewise, Louie indicates "*l v.* [laissez vibrer], hold position until sound decays" and *perdendosi* (gradually dying away)

at the end of *Memories In An Ancient Garden* and *Starstruck* for the same sonic effect. Several other devices not common in nineteenth-century music have been used by both composers for special effects. Louie adopts *senza misura* (without strict time) for expressive rhythmic effect, and Debussy achieves a special voicing effect by his indication *en dehors*, applied musically to a melodic line which he means to be particularly prominent. Both *senza misura* and *en dehors* provide performance guides, and result in a new option for creating variety. Like the example of the planned *diminuendo*, the consistent use of both *senza misura* and *en dehors* become individually expressive devices for conveying the special effects the composer has in mind.

### 3. Louie's Use of Titles

Almost all of Alexina Louie's compositions bear titles, just as most Chinese compositions do--even when a work is cast in one of the Western musical genres, such as the piano concerto, *Yellow River*.[14] Some of the titles that Louie chooses for her compositions obviously come directly from her Chinese heritage, such as *Dragon Bells* (for prepared piano and pre-recorded prepared piano, 1978), *From the Eastern Gate* (for solo harp, 1985), or *Scenes From A Jade Terrace* (for solo piano, 1988). However, more than half of her titles refer to the natural world, as is the case with her large orchestral work, *The Eternal Earth* (1986), the solo piano piece, *Star-filled Night* (1987), or the piano quintet, *Music From Night's Edge* (1988). Louie's references to nature in her titles represents

[14]The piano concerto *Yellow River* was devised by a committee of composers, including Cheng-Zong Yin, Wan-Hua Chu, Li-Hong Sheng, Zhu-Ang Liu, Shu-Cheng Shi, and Fri-Sheung Xu.

her intuitive understanding of the essence of Chinese poetry and landscape painting. Chinese believe that the most perfect state of mind is to be found in the unity between the physical state and the heavenly one, and the world of nature has often been seen as the bridge between them. Because nature is not the result of human effort, by observing its versatility, one can feel an unspeakable kind of supernatural power. In order to achieve unity, the traditional Chinese way to appreciate nature is to immerse oneself in the subject matter rather than to observe it as an outsider. And to assist in this transcendent kind of immersion, many Chinese poems and landscape paintings focus on an impressionistic portrayal of the subject matter rather than on trying to produce a realistic representation of it.

In musical composition, a similar process can sometimes be observed, as in the use of references to nature in the titles of works by Claude Debussy. Among the profusion of examples, one can cite *Clair de lune* (*Moonlight* ), *Reflets dans l'eau* (*Reflections in the water* ), and *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest* (*What the West Wind Saw* ). Louie catches the aesthetic essence of both Chinese poetry and painting and Debussyian impressionism when she chooses her descriptive titles from nature.

At the end of the fourth piece from Debussy's first book of *Préludes*, the composer attaches a title in brackets: *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* (*Sounds and scents mingle in the evening air* ), a highly evocative line from a poem by the symbolist poet, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867).[15] Using a similar approach, Louie's solo

[15]In Debussy's two books of *Préludes*, he puts the title at the end of every piece in brackets, rather than at the beginning.

piano work, *I leap through the sky with stars* (1991) derives its title from a Zen poem by Dogen (1200-1253):

> Four and fifty years
> I've hung the sky with stars.
> Now I leap through--
> What shattering!

This poem concerns death and spirituality; instead of seeing death as an ending, the poem considers how one's life is able to inspire others even after one is dead. Stimulated by this thought, Louie implies a juxtaposition of an artist's life, works, and their everlasting influences in *I leap through the sky with stars*. Musically, she contrasts the light, shimmering section in the upper register with the forceful, robust section in the lower part of the keyboard. The visual effect on the printed page as well as the physical movement of the pianist reflect the descriptive character of the title--leaping, the sky, the stars. In addition, in this work Louie effectively contrasts the improvisatory section, using *senza misura* and arpeggio figuration, with the strict-time section, using constantly running sixteenth-notes. These contrasted figurative styles, along with the juxtaposition of registers, convey the duality between death and life that is powerfully presented in the Zen poem. In other words, Louie's use of titles is not only descriptive, but also metaphorical.

In *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*, Debussy takes inspiration from the words to produce reflex reactions that strongly effect both the player's and the listener's aural perception. A similar situation transpires in Alexina Louie's *Scenes From A Jade Terrace*,

where the second movement, *Memories In An Ancient Garden*, bears the performance direction, "play as if intoxicated by the scent of a thousand blossoms." Like Debussy, Louie uses olfaction to stimulate one's musical imagination, transforming the physical aspect of scent into that of sound.

In his choice of titles, Debussy also draws inspiration from antiquity. Several examples can be cited in Debussy's two books of *Préludes* for solo piano. *La cathédrale engloutie* refers to Gregorian chant, early medieval polyphony (organum), and Gothic cathedral architecture; *Canope* evokes the moods and atmosphere of pharaonic Egypt; and, *Danseuses de Delphes* refers to the oracle at Delphi in ancient Greece. Louie's *Scenes From A Jade Terrace*, her first large solo piano work, likewise relates to the ancient past. This work consists of three movements: *Warrior*, *Memories In An Ancient Garden*, and *Southern Sky*. Louie describes the background of the first two movements in the program note appended to the score: a lone figure is seated on an ancient Chinese terrace overlooking a fragrant garden set against the backdrop of a valley. The "Warrior" of the first movement is not a real human being but the ghost of an ancient warrior.[16] By contrasting the aggressive outer sections with the irresolute middle section of this movement, Louie further intends to depict the artist's dual roles of champion and poet. In the second movement, in addition to having the pianist play inside the piano to create a haunting atmosphere, Louie asks the performer to play as if "conjuring up ghosts of the distant past for the seated figure," thereby enhancing the esoteric character of the music. The solid and forceful

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[16]Ghost stories were very popular in ancient China; among all the scary and bizarre stories, the most famous collection is *Liao Chai Chih I* by Sung-Ling P'u of the Ching Dynasty (1644-1912).

chords in the upper register at the beginning of the third movement (*Southern Sky* ) shift the listener's attention suddenly from a mysterious atmosphere to that of the brilliant, glittering night sky. Although, for this movement, Louie writes "the solitary soul glances up at the night sky to see a myriad of stars," the sudden shift presents a juxtaposition of Earth and Heaven, the most profound of associations in Chinese thinking. In addition to the reference to antiquity in Louie's title, her program note for *Scenes From A Jade Terrace* supplies rich details of the picturesque setting. As well as being descriptive and metaphorical, in this instance, Louie's choice of title is also poetic.

Chinese paintings are often accompanied by a poem which appears alongside the painting itself. Although there has been debate over whether this inclusion of written text destroys the sense of beauty of the painting, when the Chinese describe extremely beautiful scenery, many of the idioms include both *Shih* (poem) and *Hua* (painting). An example is "There is picture in the poem and poem in the picture." A subtle relationship therefore prevails between poetry and visual image in Chinese paintings; to the Chinese, the accompanying poem is an aid to understanding the painting. Louie knows the importance of choosing an artistic title for her compositions because, parallel to a Chinese painter's choice of an accompanying text for his painting, Louie's choice of title achieves the same purpose, which is to add beauty and depth to the work.

In conclusion, Alexina Louie, like other twentieth-century composers, is liberated from the traditional procedures regarding melody, harmony, rhythm, and musical structure in her piano compositions. Pianistically, her music shares many characteristics in common with that

of Debussy, such as use of dynamics, pedalling and verbal description--both for performance directions and as titles. On the other hand, Louie's music strongly reflects her Chinese heritage, taking inspiration from oriental music, Chinese painting and poetry, use of figuration, minimalist treatment of melody and rhythm, and use of descriptive/metaphorical/poetic titles.

In addition to discovering her own personal way of expressing herself through the management of sound, Louie is also strongly influenced by aspects of Chinese philosophical thought. Chapter Two examines the ways in which the Chinese philosophical concept of *yin* and *yang* operates in her piano works.

# Chapter Two

## *Yin* and *Yang*

In Louie's music, the essence of her Chinese heritage is evident not in her approach to music theory, but in her love of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. Her way of exploring her Chinese heritage is to capture and transform the intensity of Eastern music into her own musical language. In other words, one is unlikely to find in Louie's works some "cute" melody based on a pentatonic scale or a recreation of Chinese folk music (although such devices *have* been effectively used by composers like Debussy and Ravel, and especially Puccini in his "exotic" operas, *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*). In Louie's compositions, she manipulates the elements of Western classical music according to the principle of *yin* and *yang*.

The duality of *yin* and *yang* is one of the most important Chinese philosophical concepts. The Chinese words *yin* and *yang* represent an opposition of forces. Examples include: moon (*yin*) and sun (*yang*), Earth (*yin*) and Heaven (*yang*), feminine (*yin*) and masculine (*yang*), and so on for other pairs like darkness and brightness, black and white, weak and strong, negative and positive. According to the philosophical principle, *yin* and *yang* must exist together and in balance. In order to achieve this balance, the opposites must somehow be reconciled. This reconciliation is brought about through the important process of "change." In other words, if *yin* is more powerful than *yang* or vice versa, a way must be found to either strengthen the weaker or weaken the stronger in order to

achieve perfection. In Chinese medical practice the wholistic approach to curing illness derives directly from the balancing of *yin* and *yang*. For example, if a person goes to a Chinese doctor for a headache, the doctor will probably check the patient's foot before checking her head. The reason for doing so is that in Chinese medicine, a headache is regarded as a symptom of a disease. If one only focuses on curing the symptom, the actual cause of the discomfort will not be dealt with. The Chinese believe that the cause of any disease comes from the imbalance of *yin* and *yang* in the body of a human being. Therefore, determining whether *yin* or *yang* is stronger in the body of a person is the first step towards a cure. Once the cause has been found, restoring the balance between *yin* and *yang* will help to terminate the headache.

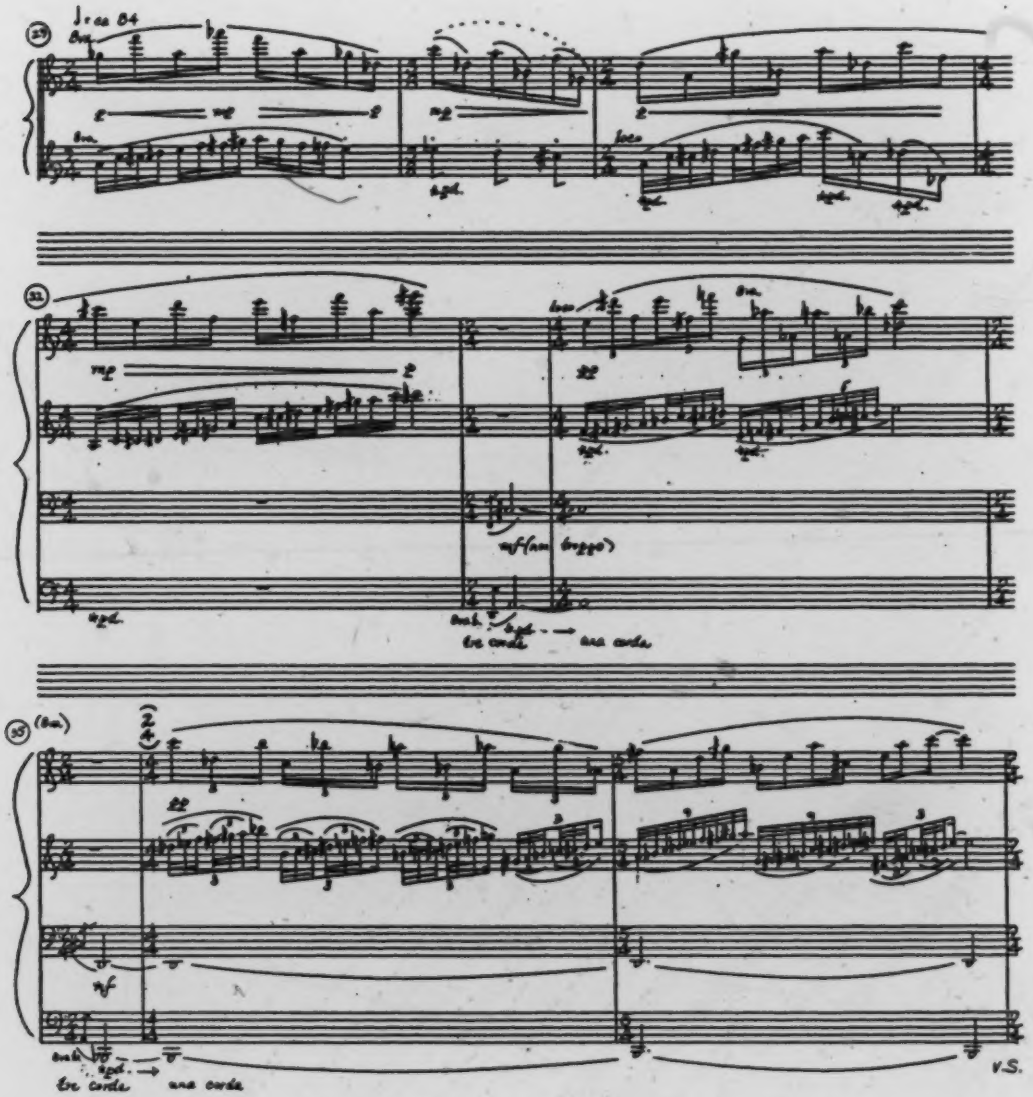
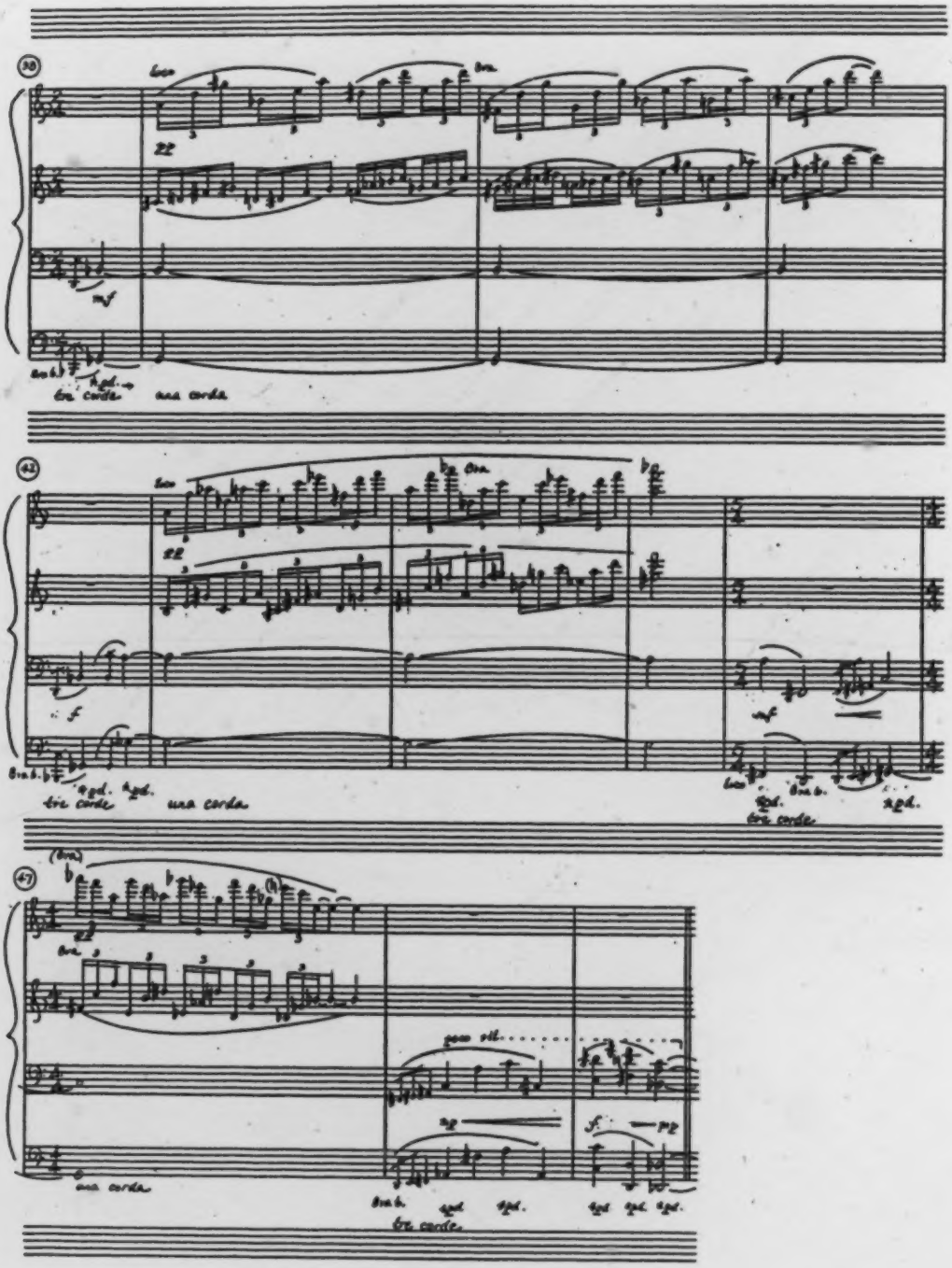
### 1. Louie's Use of the Piano

Louie utilizes the Chinese wholistic approach in her musical thinking. She acknowledges that her piano works are rarely composed in the "comfort zone"--her phrase for the middle register of the piano. She writes music either in the very high or very low registers of the instrument in order to create powerful contrasts. However, when these two extreme registers are sounded simultaneously, a blended sonic effect built upon the contrasts results in a new unification. This unification is congruent with the ideal of perfection that results from the concept of balancing *yin* and *yang*. In addition to this solution for coordinating the different registers, Louie has also found several other ways to explore the possibilities for unique timbre on the piano. One of her favorites, shown in the last

measure of *Starstruck*, involves playing black keys and white keys at the same time. This idea, on one level, is a literal presentation of *yin* and *yang*: black stands for *yin*, while white stands for *yang*. On the other hand, the five black keys constitute, by their nature, a pentatonic scale, so this idea of playing black keys and white keys can simultaneously produce a kind of bitonality. In twentieth-century compositions, bitonality has frequently been used as a juxtaposition of contrasts by Western composers such as Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók. Louie applies this idea of bitonality, but colors it with an Eastern pentatonic character to produce an ambiguity which displays not only a mixture of West and East, but also a blend of *yin* and *yang*.

Another coloristic possibility on the piano is an exploration of the pedals. As briefly mentioned in Chapter One, in Louie's solo piano works, the *una corda* sections are usually identified as being in *yin* mode, while the sections without *una corda* are in *yang* mode. One of the things that distinguishes *yin* from *yang* is that in the former the mood is always less stable than that in the latter. In order to balance *yin* and *yang* dynamically--and similar to her integration of the two registers--Louie often combines a loud section with a soft section to create a contrasting, but at the same time unified, resonance of the entire piano timbre. In Example 9, measures 29 to 49 of *Starstruck*, Louie divides the entire keyboard into two distinct parts. The upper register is more animated and stays in the very soft dynamic level with the *una corda* pedal on, while the lower part is very static in progression and stays in a louder dynamic range. The very distinctness of Louie's soundscape, created through her

use of registers, bitonality and pedalling, results in a united contrast and the equalizing of opposites, demonstrating the balance of *yin* and *yang*.

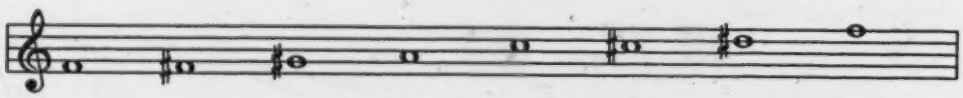


Example 9. Louie, *Starstruck*, mm. 29-49.

## 2. Theoretical Aspects [17]

A. Horizontal Approach--Scale and Melodic Treatment

The fundamental building material in Louie's works is a specific contrived scale, particular to each work. But it is very common for Louie to add an extra note to this basic scale. This is described as the "color tone" by Jon Kimura Parker in his thesis, "The Solo Piano Music of Alexina Louie: a Blend of East and West."[18] The chosen color tone is either an upper neighbor or a lower neighbor note to one of the notes in the basic scale. For instance, Example 10a shows a semi-chromatic scale --F, F-sharp, G-sharp, A, C, C-sharp, D-sharp, and F--which is considered as the foundation for *Starstruck*.

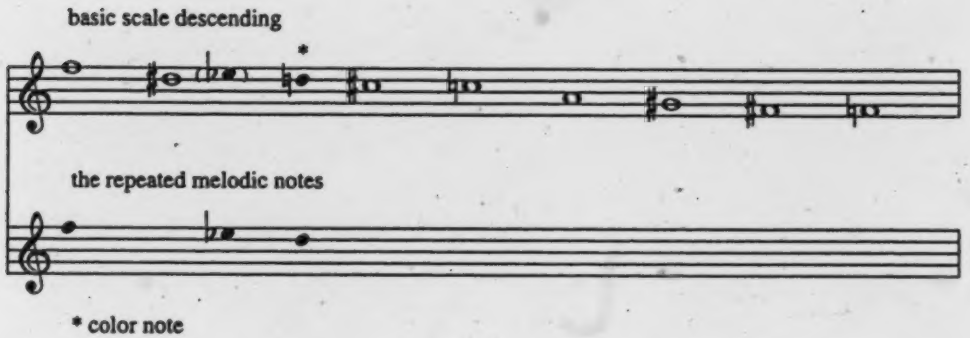


Example. 10a. Basic semi-chromatic scale for the first movement of *Starstruck*.

[17]Jeffrey Ryan has a more detailed discussion of this issue in his essay "Pitch Organisation in Alexina Louie's *Winter Music*: The *Yin/Yang* Principle in Structure and Design" (DMA diss., The Cleveland Institute of Music, 1995).

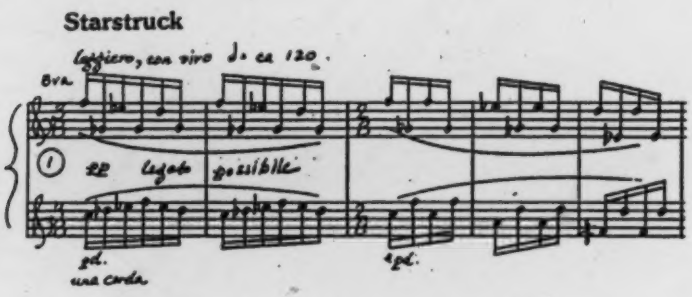
[18]Jon Kimura Parker, "The Solo Piano Music of Alexina Louie: A Blend of East and West" (DMA diss., The Juilliard School, 1989), 19.

The melody at the beginning of this piano work consists of the repetition of F, E-flat, and D. As shown in Example 10b, F and E-flat, also spelled as D-sharp, are derived from the basic scale, while D-natural is an added color tone.



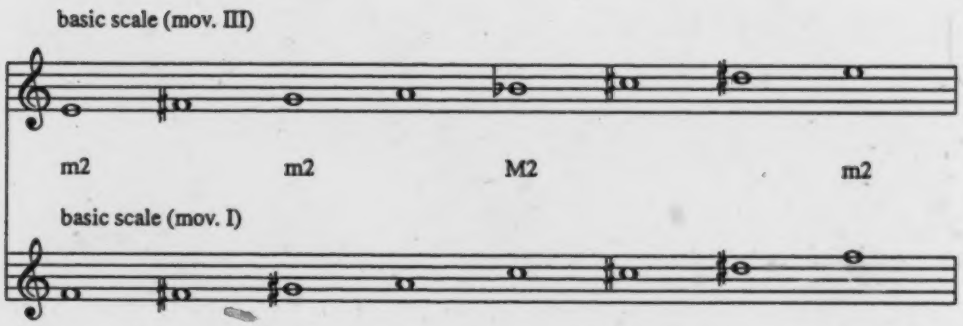

Example 10b. Repeated melodic notes of the opening of *Starstruck.*

Example 10c further demonstrates that this D-natural in the melody appears simultaneously with its lower neighbor D-flat in the accompaniment, creating an obscurity.



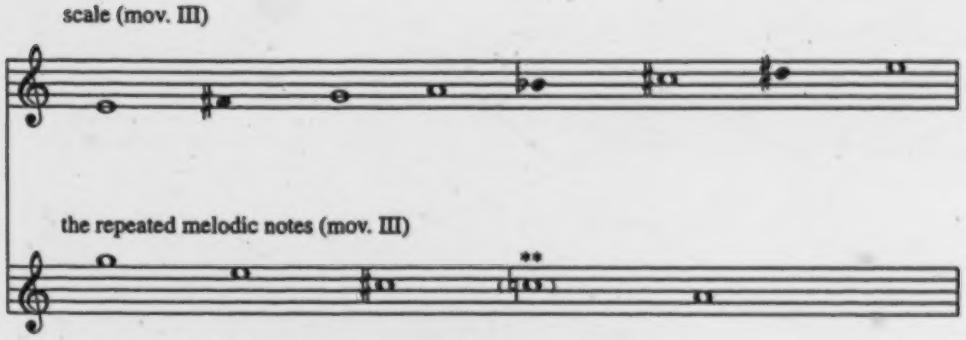

Example 10c. Louie, *Starstruck,* mm. 1-5.

Louie not only applies the principle of adding the color note to tint the basic scale, but also expands this idea to a larger extent. In Example 11a, the third movement of *Starstruck*, *Berceuse des étoiles*, the scalar pattern E, F-sharp, G, A, B-flat, D-flat, E-flat, and E (which can also be read as E, F-sharp, G, A, B-flat, C-sharp, D-sharp, and E) is derived from the basic scale of the first movement. Compared to the original basic scale, the scalar notes F, G-sharp, and C are replaced by E, G, and B-flat in this varied scale of the third movement. From observing the changes, we notice that the color note E is a lower neighbor to F, as is G to G-sharp, while B-flat and C present a whole-tone relationship.




Example 11a. Comparison between the basic scale for the third movement *(Berceuse des étoiles)* and that in the first movement of *Starstruck*.

Like the melodic treatment shown in Example 10b, the melody of *Berceuse des étoiles* in Example 11b is also contrived from a few repeated notes. And these repeated notes are also derived from the scale of the third movement. As mentioned in Chapter One, this type of presentation of Louie's melodies is influenced by the Eastern ideal of control and minimalisation.




The whole notes are the repeated melodic notes.
** C-natural is a non-scalar note, but it can be seen as a color note.

Example 11b. Comparison between the repeated melodic notes and the basic scale of *Berceuse des étoiles*

In order to retain a clear tonal character, Louie adds color tones to create the variations based on the basic scale, the essential building material in her works. As a result, the tonal center can still be strongly sensed regardless of the added non-scale color notes. Moreover, within this tonal center, a juxtaposition of "yes" and "no"--"yes" being the original scale, "no" being its variations--results in the effect of vagueness

as well as unity in her music. This duality of vagueness and unity again shows how Louie applies the idea of a balanced contrast to her horizontal treatment.

B. Vertical Approach--Harmonic Scheme and Chords

In addition to the melodic treatment, the elements of the basic scale also provide the material for harmonic structure. Harmonically, following the Western classical tradition, every one of Louie's works has its own progression and goal with the "tonal centers" carefully structured in relation to each other. One very interesting aspect of this approach is observed by Mark Neumann in his article about Louie's chamber concerto for viola and eleven instruments entitled *Winter Music*. Neumann writes that Louie considers major sevenths and tritones to be rather like "compressions" of the fundamental octaves and perfect fifths of traditional practice.[19] In order to bring out the conflicts without destroying the sense of tonality, Louie replaces octaves by major sevenths and fifths by tritones. Jeffrey Ryan suggests that this type of sonority is used precisely for its strong "tonal" implication.[20] In Louie's *Starstruck*, this distinct sonority is made possible through her particular selection of tones in the semi-chromatic scale that forms the basic scale of all four movements. As mentioned earlier, this basic scale in *Starstruck* is F, F-sharp, G-sharp, A, C, C-sharp, D-sharp, and F. In Example 12, we observe that this scale can be seen as a combination of a major triad made

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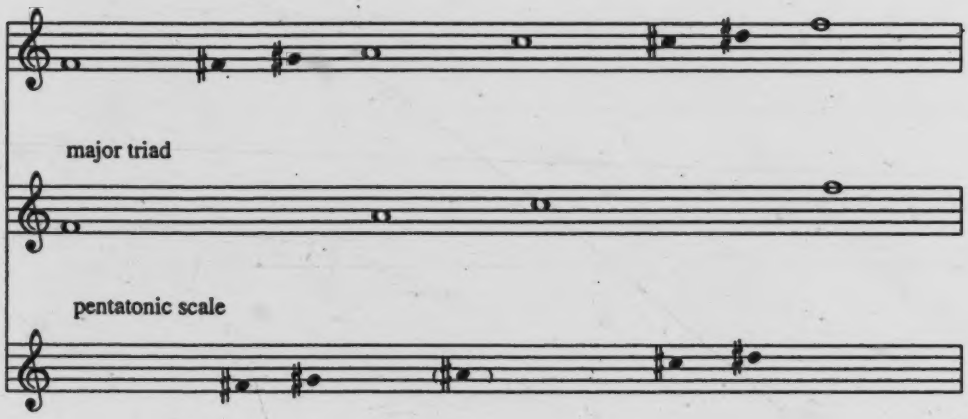
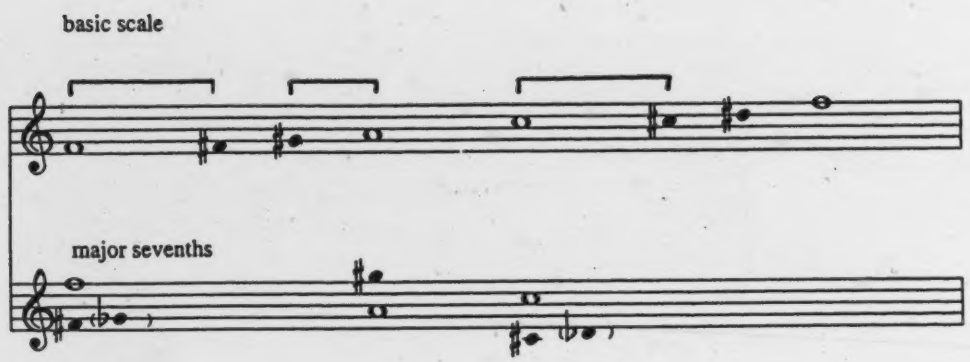
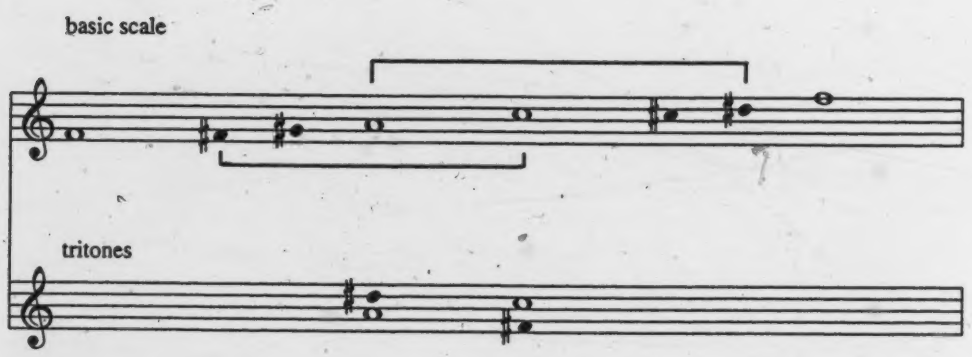
[19]Mark Neumann, "'Winter *Music*: Chamber Concerto for Viola and Eleven Instruments,' by Alexina Louie," 1993(?) TMs [photocopy], p. 10, collection of Alexina Louie, Toronto.

[20]Ryan, "Pitch Organisation in Alexina Louie's *Winter Music*," 31.

up of the white notes F, A, C and an incomplete pentatonic scale made up of the black notes C-sharp, D-sharp, F-sharp, and G-sharp.

Example 12. The analysis of the basic scale for *Starstruck*.

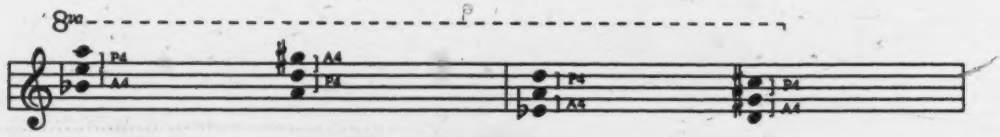
Moreover, in Example 13, if we inspect the relationship between every two adjacent notes, we find that every white note is accompanied by either an upper or a lower neighbor note. An examination of the basic scale reveals that F-sharp to F, A to G-sharp, and C-sharp to C form major sevenths. And the relationships between the notes of the basic scale can further be seen to include the tritones found between F-sharp and C and between A and D-sharp, as shown in Example 14.




Example 13. How the basic scale forms major sevenths.

Example 14. How the basic scale forms tritones.

Therefore, it is evident that Louie's choice of her basic scalar material supplies her with a variety of strong tonal implications. In addition, because she uses the same basic scale for both melody and harmony, she further integrates the horizontal and vertical lines. This integration not only agrees with principles of Western classic music, but also reflects her understanding of the balanced relationships of *yin* and *yang*.

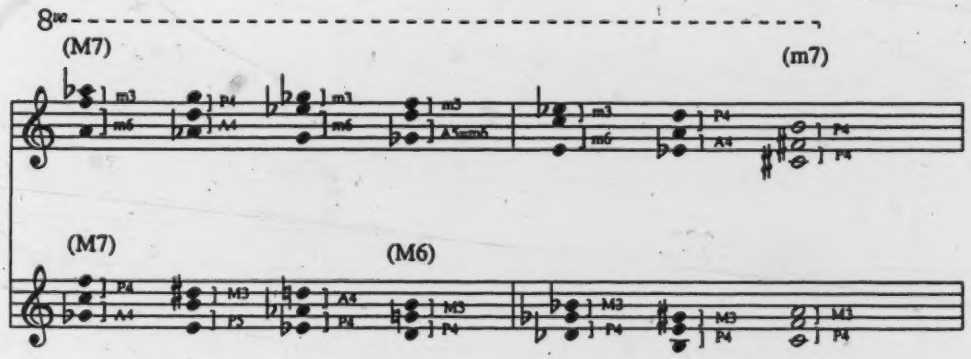
Another important component of Louie's harmonic vocabulary is her arrangement of quartal chords. Louie has said that she has worked for years to find sonorities which she considers to be the right choice for the piano; these sounds appear in almost every one of her piano works.[21] Between melodic sections, Louie loves to place a chordal section, which is usually furnished by a series of quartal chords. Example 15 shows Louie's usual configuration of the quartal chord, comprising a perfect fourth and an *augmented* fourth (this dissonant-sounding augmented fourth, the so-called tritone, can also be written as a diminished fifth). This quartal chord was also a central building-block for Schoenberg and his students, and is sometimes therefore called "the Viennese chord."




Example 15. Louie, *Memories In An Ancient Garden*, mm. 63-64, r. h.

[21] Alexina Louie, interview with the author, 16 December 1996, Toronto (audio and video recordings).

The association of the consonant perfect fourth with the dissonant tritone exemplifies a perfect solution of balancing *yin* and *yang*. Moreover, just as she introduces color notes to a basic scale, Louie also adds color notes to the quartal chords in order to prevent the progression from sounding repetitious (but without changing the nature of the original quartal chord). These varied chords are presented in several ways in Example 16.




Example 16. Louie, *Starstruck*, mm. 50-51.

First, instead of superimposing a tritone on a perfect fourth resulting in a major seventh, Louie uses a major third built on a perfect fourth. This combination forms a major sixth, which is also the second inversion of a major triad. Major sixths and major sevenths create a contrast between dissonance and consonance and their alternation fuses the duality of *yin* and *yang*. Second, she sometimes superimposes a minor third on a minor sixth, or a major third on a perfect fifth to replace the combination of a

perfect fourth with a tritone. As all three arrangements construct major sevenths, parallel progressions of major sevenths are produced, but at the same time, an ambiguity is also created. The uncertainty caused by Louie's arrangement of major sevenths meets the mutative requirement in balancing *yin* and *yang*.

C. Formal Structure

Another example of Louie's fusion of Chinese philosophy and Western music occurs in her approach to musical form. Louie says she was attracted by the architecture of musical form when she first studied musical analysis.[22] She once spent six months analyzing only Bach chorale settings, an exercise she initially regarded as a waste of time. She quickly changed her mind, however, after completing a few analyses. She was amazed that she could find almost every compositional element, such as anticipation, suspension, resolution, cadence, and much more within a short four-part composition. Later, she began to wonder why some pieces moved her more than others, why some works made people want to hear them over and over again. These were the kinds of questions that developed her determination to become a composer. And, over the years, her desire to produce some kind of long-lasting art has motivated Louie's compositional ambitions. Among all the musical styles she studied, Louie was especially entranced by Franz Schubert's *Impromptus*--Opp. 90 and 142 (1828), Johannes Brahms' late *Klavierstücke*--Opp. 118 and 119 (1892-3), and Arnold Schoenberg's *Six Little Pieces for Piano* Op. 19 (1911) and the *Suite* Op. 25 (1921). In addition, she was deeply attracted

[22]Ibid.

by the power of Beethoven's late piano sonatas (1816 to 1822), which could be said to have certain meditative qualities in common with Eastern music. Both the structure and the introspective quality of the works by other composers just mentioned are reflected in Louie's music.

Stylistically speaking, Louie's compositions, especially her piano works, are short but highly concentrated. In order to provide rich content within a short composition, one important factor for Louie is the arrangement of tempi. Whether it is a multi-movement or a single-movement work, a piano piece by Louie is never longer than fifteen minutes, and all these works follow the rule of fast and slow alternations of tempi. In traditional Western music (suite, opera, sonata), alternations between tempi have long been considered a "standard element," for contrast created by the succession of different tempi is an important factor for achieving dramatic effect. Louie ensures that this principle of tempo contrast is maintained when she composes; but, she also gives *character* to the contrasted tempi based on the *yin* and *yang* concept. In addition to the contrast between fast and slow sections (standardized in Western classic music) in her works, Louie's music presents two distinct characters: the more elastic *rubato* or *senza misura* section and the section in strict time (both common in Eastern music). Therefore, in her combinations of different tempi, Louie again intermingles both Western and Eastern influences.

In the previous chapter, it was noted that Louie's use of *senza misura* sections provide a unique "flavour" in her music; however, this free rhythmic character can also be regarded as an emotional component for distinguishing Louie's personal style. Like the quality of *yin*, the

*rubato* or *senza misura* section creates an unsettled and obscure mood. In contrast to this, the strict-time section provides a definite and assured emotional quality. As a result, although the listener can still feel the tempo distinctions between movements or sections, the intervention of the *yin* and *yang* characters within each section or movement reduces the clear divisions between them. In other words, in Alexina Louie's music, although a balance can be already achieved by a fast-slow-fast arrangement, throughout the larger tempo scheme, a balanced contrast (the elastic with the strict sections) proceeds continuously in order to fulfill the mutative and reconciliatory requirement of *yin* and *yang*.

In conclusion, because the balancing of *yin* and *yang* is regarded as perfection in Chinese philosophy, Louie naturally applies this concept to Western musical elements. Louie integrates the music horizontally as well as vertically in order to blend the basic scale in different dimensions. She combines dissonant with consonant intervals, not to show their differences, but their new cooperation. She also adds the "color tone" either to the basic scale, or to quartal chords, so that an ambiguity between "right" and "wrong" can be heard and felt. The spirit of vagueness and wholeness parallels the "change" factor for balancing *yin* and *yang*. Formally, although Alexina Louie does not adhere to any specific structural design, her music presents the introspective quality and condensed character of certain works by Bach, Brahms, Schubert, and Schoenberg, combined with the meditative power presented in Beethoven's late piano sonatas. Moreover, by alternating the basic fast-slow tempi principle with the concept of a balanced *yin* and *yang*, she is able to establish a unique formal arrangement, which retains both the

aural and philosophical unification merged with her distinct creation of sound discussed in Chapter One. As a result, the intensity and depth in these short, but highly concentrated works is congruous with the perfect presentation of *yin* and *yang* in every aspect.

## Conclusion

Alexina Louie insists that her compositions must be compelling to herself first, as a measure of their compelling power for the audience. When she composes, she strives to define her bi-cultural identity through her music. Being a Canadian-born Chinese, she inherits both Western and Eastern cultures. However, in Louie's music, it is difficult to point to specific passages which derive from either her Western or her Eastern background. This consequence is the result of two factors. First, Louie has so completely immersed herself in both cultures that she is able to create her own original and unique musical language. An example of this is the simultaneous existence of *yin* and *yang* in her music. These two elements (either *yin* and *yang* or Western and Eastern influences) are reconciled and transformed into a new manner, which becomes Louie's personal voice. Second, Louie has so intelligently and sensitively chosen her Western models that she is able to produce her own original musical style in congruence with these models, which themselves blend elements of East and West (Debussy and minimalism).

Louie's fusion of her dual heritages in her musical language can be observed in two practical ways. First, she chooses compositional devices present in both Eastern and Western music such as parallelism, the fragmented and simple arrangement of melody, introspective and meditative qualities, and the use of verbal descriptions. Second, even if she uses many sonic devices in a Western manner, they are conditioned by Eastern ways of hearing, seeing, and thinking.

The Silk Route is the ancient trade route that linked China with the West and carried goods and ideas between the two great civilizations of Rome and Cathay. Alexina Louie is a composer who is traveling on the Musical Silk Route, because her musical language carries ideas and inspirations from both East and West.

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